

MEMORIES OF PETER GEOFFREY TAYLOR (1926-2011)

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I'm Peter's eldest son. I would like to share with you some of my memories of my Dad—in particular his many other skills beyond botany; he was always a scientist and curious about how things worked and this has been passed on to me, except I'm interested in mathematics and physics. I'm very proud of my Dad and was pleasantly surprised how often his name appears on the web, especially since he didn't touch it himself. Because these web references are largely in the context of *Utricularia*, I want to get some of his other interests on file. For example, he was an especially fine cabinet maker and I have many pieces of furniture made by him. He has made quite a few ancient keyboard instruments. He also had a great love of butterflies and other insects.

Before I was Born – WWII Stories

My Dad was only 13 when WWII broke out. He spent his time collecting and raising butterflies in Bedfordshire. Of course caterpillars have to eat! They are quite fussy so my Dad developed an interest in plants and botany as well. My Dad cycled everywhere on these trips. When my Dad left school he was apprenticed to Commer Cars, and made armoured cars and lorries in their metal workshop. My Dad was very fond of telling stories about when he was a lad and here are a few....



My Dad with his Baffo harpsichord in his workshop at Kirdford. Photo from David Hunt.

Once, while out botanising during the war on his bicycle he sat down for his lunch beside the road. Only later did he realize he was resting on stockpiled canisters of chlorine gas. The Germans never dared use gas in WWII, but we kept our own supply just in case.

Once my Dad was cycling home during a blackout. He tucked in behind a car because its lights were better than his. He kept his eyes on the car's rear lights, but ended up following them all the way up their drive by mistake, it was so dark.

Towards the end of WWII a V2 missile struck the canteen where he was apprenticing at Commer. He used to describe how it raised the roof of the building he was working in and then how the dust settled back in place. A newspaper article that covered the event noted that 19 people were killed.

When my Dad was given the opportunity to work at Kew, the Foreman at Commer Cars offered him an extra penny an hour to stay. (My Dad went to Kew anyway.)

My Dad told me that the pesticide used to kill insects on plant specimens at Kew was the same stuff the Germans used during the war. My Dad used to recount how he would open a tin and putting it quickly in with the plants in a cabinet that could be exhausted afterwards.

Africa Stories

Soon after my Dad and Mum got married he went on a botanising trip (Sept. 1955—Aug. 1956) to East Africa for Kew. He went with Edgar Milne-Redhead who was to become one of my god-parents. They visited the Songea district of Tanganyika (now Tanzania). My Dad had his 30th birthday while in Africa. This trip resulted in countless stories that he loved to recount....

My Dad and Edgar were travelling in the deserted country between two towns—no one was in sight. As they drove, they saw an African in khaki uniform at the side of the road who flagged them down. He asked if one of them was Peter Taylor. Apparently there was a phone call for my Dad! The man promptly shinned up a telephone pole, attached a phone to the line, and handed it to my Dad. (I think it was to say a part for one of their vehicles was ready; it had been specially flown in.)

The bridges on the East African road were always being washed away in the wet season, so my Dad designed and helped the Africans build a good one. He was obviously very proud of its construction. He took photos of it and colour film was expensive! Every night while on safari, my Dad and Edgar engaged in the nightly ritual of changing the paper in the plant presses. They had a drying tent, and one night it caught fire. They didn't lose any plant presses, but their straps (or rather what was left of them) had to be sown together. Dad had lots of these canvas straps at home, they were very useful.

One night their sleeping tent was burgled. One of their African "boys" threw a machete after the escaping burglars, and the blade glanced one in the back of the neck. This culprit was arrested when he went to a local doctor for stitches. He was lucky not to be more seriously damaged! Most of the stolen stuff was recovered; the burglars dropped most during their escape.

Phillip Cribb at my Dad's memorial at the Linnean Society said my Dad made a model of their camp, which is still at Kew. Phillip Cribb is the son of Peter Cribb one of my Dad's butterfly friends that he met through the Amateur Entomologists' Society.

My Dad picked up a little Swahili while he was in Africa. I got the impression Edgar was the boss and my Dad did the work that couldn't be done by the Africans. One time my Dad asked the Africans what a river was called. Later he discovered the Swahili word he had been given as an answer was simply "River"!

Childhood Memories

We lived in two houses during my childhood. The first house (Old Manor Drive) didn't need much work, but the second house (Conway Road) required a lot of restoration work. My Dad did everything himself and was a very capable carpenter, brick layer, and plasterer. He would try his hands at anything....



A bridge that Peter and helpers made. And, yet, there was always another missing bridge.

My Dad kept us children under strict control and followed the mantra “Children should be seen and not heard”. He brought back from Africa a large heat-hardened spoon-like paddle. This was used as a threat so that we would be good. My Mum says she was under strict instructions to make sure all toys were put away before he got home from work. At the dinner table I still can't eat food quickly because it has to be chewed first. I certainly wouldn't eat with my mouth open or talk with my mouth full.

As a child I used to hang around with my Dad in his workshop; often holding pieces of wood while he chiselled. The smell of wood shavings was quite intoxicating. One time he said “Hold it still, don't worry about the chisel, you'll mend—the wood won't.”

Peter made us children a climbing frame with a difference: a reproduction of an Apollo service module, complete with a capsule on top. It was made from sheet aluminium wrapped around a wooden frame. This was around the time that man landed on the moon. Other friends were quite envious.

Also because we were Dr Who fans, Dad made Dalek costumes for us. They had wooden head bits like an inverted barrel, an eye piece, silvered cloth bodies and arms. EXTERMINATE!

At Conway Road he added a brick extension to our house. He did all the doors, windows, plumbing, and electrical wiring himself. I remember this house had many doorways filled in and alternatives knocked through. That was a lot of door hanging, brickwork, and plastering. He also built and installed a new set of stairs. It was assembled in his workshop and had to be moved to the house. His helper joked that it would never fit, but my Dad was confident and it fitted the first time.

I still remember when I was first allowed to eat dinner with my parents. I was sent to bed as usual and had to creep down later. I recall us children listening at the top of the stairs in our pyjamas when my parents were entertaining.

My Dad was one for routine, especially meals. When my Dad got home after work we would all sit down at the table for tea at 17:30. We would always sit at the table as a family. He had made the table, but not the chairs, he didn't like chairs. We would have bread, butter, and jam followed by some cake and biscuits. The jam was homemade and so were the cakes. This is a very middle class custom. Afterwards my Dad would disappear off to his workshop. We children always had dinner earlier and then my parents always had dinner at 19:30—that was the rule. Dad always came in when the dinner was about to go on the table. The routine and hobbies were only possible because of the tireless efforts of my Mum.

We didn't have a television until a primary school teacher observed that my current affairs awareness was rather poor. My Dad was against the TV and called it the "goggle box".

My Dad planted a plant that smelled like rotting flesh at the bottom of the garden in our 2nd house (Conway Road). It was outside his workshop! I never understood this, but it appeared to amuse him.

My Dad was certainly a perfectionist, but he allowed my sister to paint the underside of his 1st harpsichord lid – the bit that is visible when the lid is up to play. This was quite an honour. Sarah was allowed to paint one small mammal in addition to my Dad's plants and butterflies. My sister enjoys painting the eyes of birds and mammals.

I have many memories of walks in the country as a family. My Dad knew many places that few people went on the North Downs. At one place that we visited often, which my sister called The Walking Place, was awash with butterflies. You could sit still and let them come to you. My Dad caught many butterflies there, and he always had a fold-up net with him.

Once my sister and I got stuck while climbing the walls of a chalk quarry that we used to visit. My Mum had to find another way to the top and lowered a rope. My Dad followed us up and got us all to the top. We were very tearful and sorry we had caused so much anguish and stress.

My Dad always encouraged an interest in many scientific subjects and I was introduced to astronomy, chemistry, geology, and electronics. My Dad's technique was to take an interest in something and see what took hold. For example, he made short-wave radios. We always had a long horizontal aerial setup while camping. In those days you could order and have posted some pretty nasty chemicals. We had a cellar at our second house so I had a lab down there. My Dad allowed me to play with concentrated sulphuric and nitric acid, etc. Eventually my interests shifted to electronics and especially computers. (I am now a software engineer.)

One of my secondary school projects was a pen and paper recorder like you see on seismographs, but my project was to record the voltage decay of a battery. I made my recorder from Meccano fabrication kits, and some wood/metalwork that my Dad supplied.

I have a picture in my mind of my Dad with a stainless steel magnifying glass around his neck and a sharp pen knife in his pocket. One camping holiday I closed my pen knife on my finger and nearly chopped the end of my finger off. Luckily I didn't have my pen knife as sharp as my Dad's! As my Dad said so long ago "I'll mend" and I did.

One time when I was a teenager and late home my Dad locked me out and went to bed. I would have had to wake the house to get in, but luckily my wrist was so small that I managed to get the chain off the door. Another time my Dad mentioned that his Dad had locked his sister Mary out as well, but she managed to climb in a bedroom window with my Dad's help.

After Retirement from Kew (Kirdford, Woods, and Me in My 30s)

After he retired from Kew, my Dad bought himself 10 acres of woodland near Kirdford. There were two woods, one largely hazel (Bow Copse) and the other oak and ash (Spar

Rough). In the oak and ash wood he installed a large band sawmill, driven by a tractor that was also used to attach a forklift. I spent many weekends and holidays in these woods. My Mum and Dad spent almost all their time in the woods. He had a wood workshop (band saws, planning machines, and vertical drills), a metal workshop (lathe, milling machine, and vertical drills) and a metal heat treatment workshop at Kirdford. The barn was full of various woods, a lot of it oak from the woods. My Dad was fascinated by a species of fly that laid their eggs in the end of freshly cut oak logs. The flies always turned up when a freshly cut log was available. Dad would wonder aloud, “How do the flies know when a fresh log was available”, and “What did the flies do before mankind started cutting logs with saws”? The fly larvae would emerge from the end of the logs when they were wet. He used to conduct experiments with logs outside in his garden. He had three microscopes in his study, one with a camera attached.



My Dad and Mum (Shirley) in the hazel copse wood (Bow Copse) with George Higgs who does nice water paintings of butterflies and moths.

Also he always had many keys jangling from his pocket, for the large number of out-buildings in the garden (wood workshop and extension, metal workshop, metal annealing workshop, garage). He was king of workshops and their extension. They could never be big enough.

I have many a fond memory about the woods. I recall the initial checking of the boundary for rabbits that have dug their way under the fence. My Dad used to have a shotgun and shot any rabbits that had got into the woods. (How dare the rabbits eat his plants?) We would light huge bonfires after clearing the undergrowth. He would always point out a “rare plant” of which he was proud. It was rare for the area, not for the country, but I don’t recall its name.

The Hazel Copse wood was especially nice because it would change throughout the seasons. Spring was marked by the arrival of the wood anemone, primroses, and then the bluebells. Fox-gloves were next. Adders basked in the sun, as woodpeckers pecked overhead. It was very lovely.



Dad's first instrument (left), a clavichord dated 1965. My sister Sarah did the painting on green harpsichord (right) and my Dad was very fond of the Latin phrase on underside of the lid (*Sic Transit Gloria Mundi*). Photos from David Hunt.

One of the trees he cut down was too big for his sawmill so we split it apart with wooden wedges banged in with a sledgehammer. When a wedge disappeared into the trunk, another was used to proceed. Eventually the trunk split in half and was small enough to fit on sawmill. (The trick was not to run out of wedges.) We used sawmill “dogs” to hold the log in place. Dad didn’t like real dogs, as one terrorised him in his pram when he was a baby. I think he liked banging the sawmill “dogs” hard.

My Mum and I used to dig ditches and otherwise repair the track leading to one of the woods. One day we were not amused when a fox hunt galloped along the track, undoing all our efforts. One winter we set up a clay pigeon trap in one of the woods. We both enjoyed that.

We would break at 11 o’clock for coffee (with plain biscuits) and 3 o’clock for tea (with chocolate biscuits) in the Shepherd’s Hut in Spar Rough. We dug a large pond that we called Shirley Lake. We had another pond at the front of the wood that was good for dragonflies.

My Mum and Dad were staying in Kew on the night of the Big Storm of 1987. Many oaks came down on their property, including one that fell through some overhead electricity cables. Luckily my Dad had his chainsaw in the car; otherwise they wouldn’t have got home—even with it, they had to make many diversions. We’d fell trees with my Mum and me pulling on a rope to help bring the tree down in the correct direction while my Dad worked with a chainsaw. After it was felled we all set to dismembering the tree. The smaller stuff for burning and the trunk for sawmill.

I have many of my Dad’s furniture that he made for me, including a table with twenty-four drawers. His drawers were always perfectly made. I have a lot of furniture that my Dad made from various woods: a walnut dining table, a CD case in ash, an oak desk, and bookcases made from London plane tree, mahogany, oak, and elm, and a kitchen table of elm.

My Dad has made clavichord, a virginal and several harpsichords. They have mostly been donated to the English Organ School and Museum (EOS) in Somerset. David Hunt (from Kew) and his wife Margaret Phillips founded the EOS and housed a few organs and my Dad’s instruments in a chapel.

When my Dad and I went down to the EOS to a recital once, Margaret played my Dad’s 1st harpsichord and when she was finished asked the builder to stand up. My Dad did some work for David Hunt when they were both at Kew—my Dad adapted David’s garage to get some organ pipes through the ceiling. My Dad paid for one of his granddaughters to have keyboard lessons. He was making her a small harpsichord when he died. He had almost finished an-

other harpsichord that was a replica of a harpsichord at the Victoria and Albert Museum, by Baffo. My sister is going to do the painting. Videos of my Dad and this harpsichord can be seen on line at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ma2xAGq66bo> (the original Baffo at the V&A) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ve9v51YB-8M> (Dad's replica).

I remember the changing the caterpillar food ritual for butterflies he was breeding for release in his woods. My Mum had to continue this ritual while my Dad was off on his various botany trips in America, Australia, and India. Obviously he made the butterfly cages. When he stopped collecting butterflies he collected moths using a moth lamp in the back garden.

His chair at home was surrounded by books. He had many dictionaries in different languages, thesauruses, and books on etymology. He loved words and their use. He also had a love of limericks especially if they were a little risqué.



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